In Our Town

It's Summer as Usual in the Ghetto. Here Are a Few Slices of Life on the Crowded East Side

A Mecca of Bargains

THE mecca of the East Side bargain hunter is a strip of Orchard Street between Rivington and Delancey. It is like a rainbow thread in the gridiron of gray thoroughfares. Its curbs are forever lined with pushcarts laden with a thousand and one variegated wares, piled high in colorful profusion and vividly reminiscent of an Oriental bazaar in an "Arabian Nights" episode. From morning until late into the night the turgid air resounds with a loud and confused clamor of buying and selling, with the stentorian voices of the pedlers rising like war cries above the babel. Jostling and boisterous crowds are feverishly ranging up and down the row of pushcarts, coagulating into serried ranks about those carts that offer some special attractions and spending hours in scrutinizing and handling articles in one cart after another in an endless quest for bargains.

The merchandise on sale runs the scale of household needs. These stores on wheels do not confine themselves to a single type or kindred kinds of goods. Nearly all of the pushcarts display a bizarre assortment of startling variety. Almost everything is seen on some of the carts, from a set of imitation ruby cuff links and Colonial andirons to a hot-water bag, hobnobbing with a tattered set of Victor Hugo.

On a typical day there can be found on sale cakes of soap incrusted with the greenish mould of ages; a cheap replica of the "Three Graces" gazing longingly into a pile of underwear and faded bathing suits; a collection of hardware in various states of corrosion; silk shirts, colored with a blinding flamboyancy in awning stripes; soft collars bereft of their lawful shirts; a cartful of dolls' heads, suggesting a possible French revolution in dollland; woven ties, all bearing the manual of commerce, is a heterogeneous array of articles and is sometimes bought by weight. It is often quite impossible to arrive at an exact cost per item, so that the pedler figures each individual separately by a sort of haphazard mathematics.

The method of procedure is astoundingly different from the practices of well ordered negotiations. The pedler, with a gesture and phrase implying that he is giving the thing away for nothing, will name his price. The customer shows complete astonishment at the extravagance of his demand and signifies that he has not the least desire to buy at such an exorbitant figure. The result is a form of catch-as-catch-can conversation that approaches an overheated controversy and rapidly becomes a verbal duel. With fervent oaths the pushcart proprietor swears by everything that is holy to his religion that the transaction is a downright loss to him and it will make paupers of all his children. To lend awesome majesty to his voluble adjurations, he sacrifices his whole family tree to the very root and, in a perfervid peroration, places his own humble life as a hostage for his truthfulness. Unmoved by these heroics, uttered with vehement and effusive gesticulations, the prospective buyer, sure of his ground, calmly repeats his original offer, which is about half the price demanded. Back and forth the words fly with increasing intensity. The pedler is now hanging on his customer's sleeve and trying to wheedle him into paying the price, but it has no effect. Then, as a final resort, the exasperated merchant suddenly reminds himself of a few distant relatives whom he had previously banished from the hospitality of his home, and these he ruthlessly slays by swearing away their lives to sustain his weakening cause. But the stubborn-minded purchaser, tired of the affray, serves his ultimatum and starts to move away, when the pushcart man, with a muttered curse under his breath and retaining his studied mien of

heraldry of damaged goods; curios and objets d'art from all climes and times; a sale of sandals, at 20 cents a pair, besieged by clamoring Semites, suddenly inspired with the spirit of a Grecian renaissance and the chance for a bargain; an unstrung zither, that may have known at one time some master's hand; cigarettes of an unsuccessful brand, selling at three cents a pack; a pile of underwear, coyly hiding its defects; empty birdcages, with twisted wires; chipped busts of the famous, etc., ad infinitum.

Each cart is a separate entity in this conglomerate mart and gathers about its wheels a motley collection of people. Some are collarless and flannel shirted; some are millinered and gowned in taffeta or broadcloth; others wear shawls on their heads and skirts of calico. But though different stages of wealth mark their varying estates of life, they all seem to have a common purpose in this seething bustle and indecorous haggling, attracted to the wares by the hue and cry raised by the howling hawkers. Each pilgrim to this mecca is bent on bringing home an indisputable and gainful bargain to his family, so that his or her fame as a clever purchaser will be enduringly established. It is a sign of almost intellectual greatness in some East Side families to engineer a coup d'état against the merchant class.

The method of reaching a mutually amicable price between buyer and seller is singular and attended with many vicissitudes of word and gesture. Often as not the pedler is unaware of the true market value of his commodities. His purchases are for the most part made in job lots at auction sales. "Job lot," in the Orchard Street financial loss, surrenders to his customer's terms.

While these minor comedies of business are being enacted here, from the next two blocks of Orchard Street, between Rivington and East Houston, a terrific din and cackle of voices rise. The market here is dedicated mainly to the sale of vegetables, fish and fruits. Because the pedler has no rent and other expenses incident to store-keeping, he can afford to sell at a few pennies less. Attracted by this advantage and stimulated by a necessary thrift, the housewives from many blocks around flock to this centre. The pedlers shout continually and the women mill around the pushcarts like whirlpools. There is one peculiar hawker's cry that always provokes a smile in the cynical-minded. Phonetically its Yiddish sounds like "Veiber tzvey ah pennah," which translated literally means "Wives two for a penny," giving the impression of a slave market or a rendezvous for Mormons. But in reality it means the particular articles which are on sale are two for a penny and the "Veiber" part is the salutation. In his hasty vociferations the pedler does not make necessary rhetorical pause to prevent the ambiguity.

"Orchard Street" on the East Side has become proverbial for cheapness, supplanting even "Hester Street," which was once popularly employed in this connection. If one wants to cast a reflection on an article of apparel it is sneeringly referred to as having been purchased in "Orchard Street." Merchants who keep shops of the better class use an effective method for despoiling customers who want a thing much below the stipulated price. They contemptuously advise them to go to "Orchard Street."

Bargaining Beneath the Williamsburg Bridge

One might suppose that oranges at two cents each, pears, plums, apples and bananas at the same price and smaller ones for a penny would bring ready buyers. These are the prevailing prices at the stands under the Williamsburg Bridge—yet one of the venders (the lady at the left seated under the umbrella) confided that sales are few and far between until midnight.

The tall man with the black beard is sorting the fruit in his barrel into the sizes he retails at one cent, two cents, and two for five cents. Having sorted it he does not mind if the ladies just behind him pick over the one-cent variety until they are satisfied that they have selected the largest of the lot.

The lady who tarries at the extreme right dispenses toothpicks, shoeblacking, matches, safety pins, thread and buttons.

The leaning figure at the left centre will sell you corn, cabbage tomatoes, beets, horseradish (which he makes on the premises) or, if you prefer—and don't wish too great a number—tablecloths.

"Don't Worry About Us," Says Cop

PATROLMAN SAMUEL LEVINE wants to know if a lot of literary guys from Boston, London or Greenwich Village are writing up the East Side. He accuses them all of libel and says their stories are immaterial and irrelevant. He maintains that they are using dark brown or other blackish local colors on something which is pink and white.

Patrolman Levine also wants some kind of embargo on slummers and sightseers. He says that the happiest, healthiest and most prosperous people on the face of the metropolitan district ought to be left alone. And just let him get one of those long-haired writing guys looking into a dark hallway for a story, he'll arrest him for blocking the sidewalk, Patrolman Levine wants it known.

Nobody has told the truth about the East Side—this is also quoting Patrolman Levine—because it wouuld cut off from their income a number of people who would sooner write than work. He craves the lifting of tradition's censorship and a few rays of ungarnished, unadjectived truth.

"It drives me off my bean," Patrolman Levine said on the corner of Rivington and Eldridge streets, "to hear a million people in The Bronx and other places go around telling how they pity the poor on the East Side. Some of them get their pity from the Sunday stories of fellows who get their information over the telephone. The other people once lived on the East Side themselves, but they ain't keen about advertising it, so they go tut-tuttin' and pityin' like the rest.

"Looka over there!"—Patrolman Levine pointed with an unused nightstick to a wall of houses, studded with bedclothes and colored blankets—"it's 4 o'clock now, and I bet in that house of thirty-six families there ain't thirty people. Let's look."

He rapped familiarly on the doors of four flats on the ground floor in the back of the kosher butcher shop and a bakery which had smelly, sticky jelly cakes in the window. Three made no response. A heavy woman peered out in the fourth. She had been washing—herself—and said she was going out soon to give the baby an airing. She would have gone out earlier, she said, only company had come from Harlem. She hates company, she declared, because they only come to criticise your things and maybe eat a meal or two.

Patrolman Levine became jovial, like any one who is vindicated quickly and completely.

"What did I say?" he asked, rhetorically. "Was any one home? Nix, They all beat it as soon as their husbands go to work. These houses are almost empty. Of course, they ain't very clean because the people don't spent enough time in them. They are out in the air—down at Coney Island or Rockaway or Central Park. They go early, about 8 or 9 o'clock. They come home late."

He laughed suddenly and said it was a funny thing.

"The women are bigger than the men," he explained. "That is, mostly. The men can't complain with any results. The women aren't perfect housekeepers, but they sure do like their kids. I guess that is what sends them outdoors. People in other neighborhoods don't get the air half as much. I wish I could show this to some of those la-de-da writing guys."

He wasn't through at all with his refutation of the context of all literary efforts to date touching on the East Side.

"They call these people down here poor and use a lot of big words which mean broke and hungry. Why, the incomes of the people here are as big on the average as those of the people of any other neighborhood, not counting the real swell streets, maybe. They don't spend their money on rent. They buy stuff to eat and save their money. Looka this."

He stopped a hurrying little man with three or four days' collection of beard on his face. In fluent Yiddish he asked him about his business, salary and working hours. The little pedestrian was glib and willing. He said he was a glazier, he worked seven hours a day, for which he received $8. Six days are his week, Patrolman Levine's witness testified.

A large pushcart carrying combs and handkerchiefs was moving up the street. From behind it Patrolman Levine drew out the motive power, about 125 pounds of youthful Jewish person, who volubly insisted that he hadn't violated anything, never had and never would. He was a ready, even eager, witness. He gave $38 as his average weekly net. He said he was living down at Coney Island for the summer and that the robbers there were cutting into his savings. He said that the police should arrest a goniff like Rosenstein, who charged 60 cents for a 30-cent meal because his restaurant was two blocks from Coney Island. Patrolman Levine said Coney Island wasn't on his beat.

"Here's one," the patrolman remarked, and crossed the street to intercept a man who was so thoroughly in white that he might have been a tennis player at work. On closer inspection he proved to be a baker, just out of the cellar. He was questioned on his industrial connections and the economic advantages accruing from them.

"Vell," he responded, "ve onleh get sixty-vun dollars a veek. That ain't no money nowadays. But ve get four dollars bread a veek."

Patrolman Levine said that he had selected a baker because their scale was slightly higher than that of the other wage earners. The storekeepers do much better, he said.

As for food—well, he wanted it known that the East Side had seasonal fruit before the West Side or any other side; that the pastry was the best, the chicken the latest killed, the meat the juiciest, the fish the freshest. He pointed to readily substantiating carts and stores.

He wanted to know what neighborhood's women dressed more modishly than those of the East Side, and also asked whether or not thousands didn't come to shops of the section for their clothing.

"Just wait," he said. "Some day some guy is going to write the truth about this place—but I bet nobody would print it. The truth would hurt the writing business in general."

He said that if anybody would print the truth he would buy five copies of the paper himself. That rash promise set him back just a quarter.

Along Second Avenue

THE lower East Side is not usually rated as a gourmand. It is surprising, therefore, to the casual promenader on broad and spacious Second Avenue, from First to Fourteenth Street, to pass a glittering succession of eating-houses. They vie with one another in brilliancy of illumination and artistry of façade and they cluster so thickly that on some blocks they are three abreast.

Here one may indulge his appetite with all manner of dishes and titillate his palate in many languages. Deciding where to dine would be a perplexity to the stranger, because each place, to the initiate, has a different note and appeal sounding almost the complete gamut of gastronomy—from the exotic concoctions of Oriental design to the devious windings of Italian spaghetti and from the demi-tasse of Gallic origin to the *gefüllte fisch* of Hebraic traditions.

Each restaurant bears a distinct individuality. This is determined by the scale of prices, the style or nationality of service and the type of customer who, most often, gives the place its peculiar atmosphere. Not a few of the restaurants have developed a reputation for a particular item on their bills of fare, and many will flock there for this *pièce de résistance*. A great number of the boulevard's habitual diners, to escape the monotony of the ever-recurring meal, will make a complete orbit of the avenue's restaurants during the course of a week or so.

Predominant in numbers is the "dairy restaurant," an innovation peculiar to the East Side. A semi-vegetarianism thrives here, no meat dishes being served. The establishment of these places followed a wave of health talks which swept the East Side some years ago. The principal point of attack was excessive meat eating, and the herbivorous apostles were so successful in their campaign that the East Sider diminished his meat consumption and took extensively to patronizing the "dairy restaurant."

In the upper reaches of this section are the French pastry parlors, which cater to the élite of the younger set. The sumptuous surroundings of thick green carpets, artificial palms and little glass-topped mahogany tables are reflected in the high prices charged. But the East Side beaux disregard the extravagance if they can bask a little while with a pretty girl in the atmosphere of this fictitious affluence.

Near by are the famous Bohemian cafés, crowded every night to dawn with Yiddish artists, musicians, actors and litterateurs, all industriously and vehemently engaged in gesticulating and creating a sophisticated hubbub. These places are more like clubs, because the patrons are all habitués and known to each other. The cafés have added a Parisian touch with their open-air dining, and the guests lend an air of cosmopolitanism with their conversations and faces.

Around the corner, in a wide street, are a group of Italian spaghetti houses, where the serpentine food rules in all its tortuous forms and draws the innocent and unwary diner into its maze of inextricable intricacies.

Further down is an Hungarian restaurant, serving its native menu in all its dressings and odors, and, cheek by jowl, is a Rumanian "casino," displaying its bill of fare *au naturel*—an array of uncooked dishes in a showcase in the window—to tempt the eyes and snare the stomach of the passersby. Here, too, the steaks are broiled and served, bloody and hot, right off the grill, on circular wooden platters.

Then follows a series of dairy restaurants, all bearing a striking sameness, with their stained woodwork, marble-topped tables crowned with little baskets of rolls, and exhibiting window displays of a great and seasonable variety of fruits and vegetables.

There suddenly intrudes the ubiquitous self-service lunch room, fathered by the American spirit of bustle and hurry and supporters of anti-mastication. There are only two of these in the length of the boulevard, and they are patronized mainly by poor wage earners and those who want to escape the officious waiter.

Near the beginning of the avenue is a cooperative restaurant owned and patronized by the diners. They consist of a group of radicals whose business sagacity and clannishness led them to organize this place against the high cost of eating, and it has proved a highly successful venture. It is probably the only restaurant in the city owned by its diners and where the waiters are absolutely tipless.

Among the other types to be noted are a chop house where the Teutonic spirit prevails in cookery, table d'hôtes where one can get a five-course meal for 40 cents, delicatessen stores where sandwiches and pickles are munched standing up, a sprinkling of Chinese chop suey palaces, and milk stores that provide one-minute breakfasts to those who have turned a deaf ear to the alarm clock.

The most interesting, however, are the vegetarian restaurants. These places were started by Russian refugees who were disciples of Tolstoy. Flesh, fish and fowl are utterly taboo here. For a time the patrons were confined to the rigid adherents of vegetarianism, but the creed spread, and they are now doing a flourishing business. In all, there are four such places on the East Side. Monotony has been banished from the diet by the invention of ingenious dishes that simulate in name, taste and form the forbidden meat dishes, but the substance remains faithfully vegetarian.

The other areas of lower East Side are plentifully supplied with scores of eating places, and dotted, in particular, with "private restaurants." The use of the word "private" here has a peculiar interpretation. It does not connote exclusiveness, except from a particular angle. A great many of the emigrants from Russia and Rumania, even after years of alienation, have an intense craving for the dishes of their native province. They cannot assimilate the American cuisine, even though they accept its citizenship. It is, therefore, the practice of one of the inhabitants of a particular province to convert her front parlor (usually located on the ground floor of a tenement) into a miniature dining room, where she caters to a limited number of her home town folk. Her shingle announces the name of her province, such as "Pinsker," "Dwinsker," "Minsker," "Sareslover," "Balystokter," etc., as the case may be. Here the aliens meet their friends from the Old Country and lose their homesickness in the midst of familiar faces and dialects and in the odors from the kitchen, which evoke for them images of their home and surroundings.

Another institution which is part of the multifarious life of the lower East Side is the "knishe" restaurant. The "knishe" is a singular composition. One may look in all the cook books and culinary annals of all times for the recipe of a "knishe," but his efforts will be futile. Its sole habitat is the East Side. Its architecture is flat and round, about six inches in diameter and one inch in thickness. It is made of common dough and its interior is composed of buckwheat, cheese or potatoes. When ready for the oven it is baked in oil or butter.